QUEENIE HETHERTON.

By Mrs. Mary J. Holmes, author of "Tempest and Sunshine," "Ethelyn's Mistake," "Forrest House," etc.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MRS. LA RUE'S RESOLUTION.

There was a worn, tired look on Mrs. La Rue's face next morning, which she accounted for by saying she had not slept well, and that her head was aching. A walk in the crisp autumn air would do her good, she said; and soon after breakfast she left the house, and started toward Hetherton Place. Twice on the causeway she sat down to rest, and once on the bank by the side of the road which lead up the long hill. Here she sat for a long time, with her head bowed upon her knees, while she seemed to be absorbed in painful, and even agonized, reflection, for she rocked to and fro, and whispered occasionally to herself. In the distance there was the sound of wheels—some one was coming; and not caring to be seen, she arose, and climbing the low stone wall, went up the steep hill-side to the ledge of rocks, where Phil had sat with Queenie and heard his doom. It was the first time Mrs. La Rue had ever been there, and for a moment she stood transfixed with surprise and delight at the lovely view before her. In the clear autumn air objects were visible for miles and miles away, but it was not so much at the distant landscape she gazed as at the scene directly about her—at the broad, rich acres of Hetherton Place, stretching away to the westward, and southward, and eastward, and embracing some of the most valuable land in Merrivale; at the house itself, standing there on the heights so stately and grand, with aristocracy and blood showing themselves from every casement and door-post; and lastly, at the beautiful grounds, so like the parks of some of the old chateaus in France, with their terraces, and winding walks, and pieces of statuary gleaming here and there among the evergreens.

"A goodly heritage, truly," the woman said. "And would she give it all for love? God only knows, and I can only know by trying. If she will see me, I must go forward; if she refuses, I shall take it as a sign that I must forever more keep silent."

Thus deciding, she walked swiftly across the fields, and soon stood ringing at the door, which was opened by Pierre himself.

"Miss Hetherton was still in her room," he said, "but he would take any message madame chose to give him;" and his manner showed plainly the immovable distance he felt there was between his mistress and the woman who, he knew, was born in the same rank of life as himself.

"Tell her Margery's mother is here, and very anxious to see her," Mrs. La Rue said; and, with a bow, Pierre departed, leaving her alone in the hall.

He had not asked her to sit down, but she felt too faint and tremulous to stand, and, sinking into a chair, leaned her head against the hat-stand, and shutting her eyes, waited as people wait for some great shock or blow which they know is inevitable. How long Pierre was gone she could not guess, for she was lost to all consciousness of time, and was only roused when he laid his hand upon her shoulder and demanded what was the matter, and if she were sick. Then she looked up, and showed him a face so white, so full of pain, and dread, and horror, that he asked her again what was the matter.

"Nothing, nothing," she answered sharply. "Tell me what she did say? Will she see me?"

"She bade me tell you she could not see you, but if your errand was very particular, or concerned Miss Margery, you were to give it to me," Pierre replied, and in an instant the whole aspect of the woman changed, the deathly pallor left her face, and the look of dread and anguish was succeeded by one of intense relief as she exclaimed:

"Thank God! thank God! for I could not have borne it. I could not have done it at the last, and now I know it is not required of me. I have no errand, no message; good-morning," and she darted from the door, while Pierre looked wonderingly after her, saying to himself, "I believe the woman is crazy."

And in good truth insanity would best describe Mrs. La Rue's condition of mind as she sped down the winding hills and across the causeway, until the bridge was reached and then she paused, and leaning far over the railing looked wistfully down into the depths below, as if that watery bed would be most grateful to her. Suicide was something of which Mrs. La Rue had thought more than once. It was the phantom which at times haunted her day and night, and now it looked over her shoulder and whispered:

"Why not end it now and forever; death is only a dreamless sleep. Better die than live to rain that young life, and know yourself loathed and despised by the creature you love best. Sometimes in your fits of conscientiousness you will tell, as you were tempted to do just now, and then——"

Mrs. La Rue gave a long, gasping shudder as she thought, "What then?" and leaned still farther over the parapet beneath which the waters of the Chicopee were flowing so sluggishly.

"Yes, better die before I am left to tell and see the love in Margery's face turn to bitter hatred. Oh, Margery, my child Mine, by all that is sacred! I cannot die and go away from her forever, for if there be a hereafter, as she believes, we should never meet again. Her destiny would be Heaven, and mine, blackness and darkness of despair, where the worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched! She read me that last night, little dreaming that I carry about with me the worm which dieth not, and have carried it so many years, and oh, how it does gnaw and gnaw at times, until I am tempted to shriek out the dreadful thing. And yet, at first, the sin seemed so easy and so trivial, and was what is so common over there in France where everything is so different, and I was so young and ignorant, and did not think how great a wrong I was doing. God, if there is a God, forgive me, and help me to hold my tongue, and keep the love of Margery."

She had drawn back from the railing by this time, and, gathering her shawl around her, she started for home, where she found Margery in the reception-room alone, busily engaged on a dark-blue silk, which Anna Ferguson had deigned to give her to make, and for which she was in a hurry. She had been there that morning to see about it, and had found a great deal of fault with some trimming which she had ordered herself, and had insisted that the dress must be finished by twelve o'clock, as she was going with Major Lord Rossiter to West Merrivale to see a base ball match on the common.

"The match does not come off until four," Margery said, "and if you can give me until half-past two I shall be so glad."

But Miss Anna was decided; she must have it at twelve, or not at all, and when Margery asked if she would send for it, as the girl who usually took parcels home was sick, she answered, promptly:

"No, it is not my business to do that."

And Margery bore the girl's insolence quietly, and promised that the dress should be done, and put aside Mrs. Col. Markham's work to do it, because she knew Mrs. Markham was a lady and would not insult her if she chanced to be disappointed. But she felt the ill-bred girl's impertinence keenly, and her cheeks were unusually red, and her lips very white, when her mother entered the room, and, bending over her, kissed her with a great, glad tenderness as we kiss one restored to us from the gates of death.

"You look tired and worried, *ma petite*," she said, "and you are working so fast. I thought that dress was not to be finished till to-morrow."

"Now was it," Margaret answered, "but Miss Ferguson has been here and insists upon having it at twelve, and she was so overbearing, and found so much fault, and made me feel so keenly that I was only her dressmaker, that I am a little upset, even though I know she is not worth a moment's disquietude."

"Poor Margery! It is to the caprices of such people as she that you are subjected because you are poor," Mrs. La Rue said, caressing the golden head bent so low over Anna's navy-blue, on the sleeve of which a great tear came near falling. "You ought to be rich like Miss Hetherton. You would be happier in her place, would you not, my child?"

"No, mother," and Margery's beautiful blue eyes looked frankly up into her mother's face. "I should like money, of course, but I am very happy as I am, except when people like Anna insult me and try to make me feel the immeasurable distance there is between themselves and a dressmaker. I like my profession, for it is as much one as that of the artist or musician, and if I were rich as Queenie I do believe I should still make dresses for the love of it. So, mother mine, don't bother about me. I am very happy—happier far, just now, than Queenie, who, though she may have riches in abundance, has no mother to love her, and care for her, and pet her, as I have."

"Oh, Margery, child, you do love me, then you are glad I am your mother, unlike you as I am?" Mrs. La Rue cried, in a voice which was like a sob of pain and made Margery look wonderingly at her, as she said:

"Why, mother, how strangely you act this morning. Of course I am glad you are my mother—the dearest and kindest a girl ever had. I cannot remember the time when you would not and did not sacrifice everything for me, and why should I not love you."

"You should, you ought," Mrs. La Rue replied, "only you are so different from me that sometimes when I think how refined and ladylike you are, and then remember what I am—an uneducated peasant woman—I feel I am an obstacle in your way, and that you must feel it, too, and wish you were some one else—somebody like Miss Hetherton—but you don't, Margery, you don't."

"Of course I don't," Margery answered, laughingly, "for if I were Miss Hetherton, don't you see, Anna would be my cousin, and that would be worse than a hundred peasant women; so, little mother, don't distress yourself or bother me any more, for my lady Anna must have her dress by twelve, and it is nearly eleven now."

Taking the girl's lovely face between her hands, Mrs. La Rue kissed it fondly and then left the room, while Margery wondered what had happened to excite her so. Such moods, or states of mind, in her mother were not unusual, and since coming to Merrivale they had been more frequent than ever, so Margery was accustomed to them, and ascribed them to a naturally morbid temperament, combined with a low, nervous state of health.

"I wonder why she asks me so often if I love her and am happy? Maybe I do not show her my affection enough. I am not demonstrative, like her; there's very little of the French gush in me. I am more like the big Americans, but I mean to do better and pet her more, poor dear mother, she is so fond and proud of me," Margery thought, as she kept on with her work, while her mother busied herself in the kitchen, preparing the cup of nice hot tea, and slice of cream toast which at twelve she carried to her daughter, who could not stop for a regular meal.

The navy-blue was at a point now where no one could touch it but herself, and she worked steadily on until after one, when Anna, again appeared, asking imperiously why the dress was not sent at twelve, as she ordered.

"Because it was not done," Margery replied, adding, "It is a great deal of work to change all that trimming as you desired."

"It ought not to have been made that way in the first place," Anna rejoined, and then continued, "I must have it by two at the latest, and will you bring it yourself, so as to try it on me and see if it hangs right?"

"Yes, I'll bring it," Margery said, and an hour later she was trudging along Cottage Row with a bundle almost as large as herself, for the dress had many plaitings, and puffs, and bows, and must not be crushed by crowding into a small space.

But Margery did not feel one whit degraded or abased, even though she Mr. Beresford face to face, and saw his surprise at the size of the bundle. Mr. Beresford was the only man who had ever interested Margery in the least, and she often wondered why she should be interested in him, and feel her blood stir a little more quickly when she saw him. He was so proud, and dignified, and reserved, though always a gentleman and courteous to her, and now he lifted his hat very politely, and, with a pleasant smile, passed on, thinking to himself how beautiful the French girl was, and what a pity, too, that she had not been born in the higher ranks of life, with such people as the Rossiters, and Hethertons, and Beresfords.

Miss Anna was waiting impatiently, and all ready to step into her dress, which fitted her perfectly, and was so becoming, and gave her so much style that she condescended to be very gracious and familiar, and as she looked at herself in the glass, she said:

"Why, La Rue, you are a brick; how lovely it is! I have not a word of fault to find!"

"I am glad if it suits you. Good-afternoon" Miss Ferguson," Margery said quietly, and then walked away, while Anna thought.

"If she were a grand duchess she could not be more airy. I wonder who she thinks she is, any way? Queenie has just spoiled her with so much attention, and she only a dressmaker!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

LETTERS FROM MENTONE.

Whether we are sorry or glad, time never stops for us, but the days and nights go on and on, until at last we wonder that so long a period has elapsed since the joy or sorrow came which marked a never-to-be-forgotten point in our lives.

And so it was with Queenie. She could not be as wretched and disconsolate always as she was during the first days of Phil's absence. She was of too light and buoyant a temperament for that, and after a little she woke to the fact that life had still much happiness in store for her, even though Phil could not share it with her. She had received a few words from him written just before the steamer sailed—words which made her cry as if her heart would break, but which were very precious to her because of their assurance that whatever might befall the writer she would always be his queen, his love, whose image was engraven on his heart forever.

And Queenie had answered the note, for it was nothing more, and filled four sheets with her passionate longings and heart-wishes for the naughty boy who was not satisfied to be her cousin, and her shadow, but must needs seek to be her lover, and so spoil everything, and make her life miserable. Then she filled another sheet with the doings of the Major and Anna, which she said were too sickening for anything, and the talk of the whole town.

"I don't think your father and mother altogether approve the match," she wrote, "although they never say anything, but the Major has left the Knoll and gone to the hotel, where he has a suite of rooms, and where it is said Anna visits him when he is not calling upon her. You ought to see the airs and graces she has put on with her great expectations. They have a hired girl, Cynthia by name, whom Anna calls her maid, and who is taught to call Anna Miss Ferguson, which of course is right, only one likes to see things harmonize, while the maid and Miss Ferguson do not. For instance, Anna wishes to have the dinner table cleared properly as it is done at the Knoll where the servants are trained to do it, and Uncle Tom rebels against it and says he cannot wait for such fiddle-faddles, and orders on his pie almost before Anna has finished her soup and he will have a knife to eat it with, and cool his tea in his saucer, and then Cynthia proves refractory and will not come when the bell rings, and Aunt Lydia has to get up and go to the kitchen herself, and says she'd rather do it and all the work, too, than be bothered with a girl. And grandma has interfered and says, 'there is no sense in Lyddy Ann's keepin' help with Anny lazin' round; it don't make her an atom more a lady than she was when she made dresses and washed the dishes, too;' and I am inclined to think she is right. It is not what one does, but what they are themselves which gives them real worth. It is not in Anna to be a lady, and she never can be, even when she is Mrs. Major Lord Seymour Rossiter, as I suppose she will be some time during the winter, for they are engaged, and she wears a diamond ring—a splendid one, too, which she says cost five hundred dollars. How does she know that, I wonder? and she means to go to Florida on her bridal trip, and flaunt her splendor at the St. James. When the wedding comes off I'll tell you all about it, and so adieu.

"Forever and ever your cousin,

"QUEENIE."

This letter was sent to Rome, for Phil was to take the overland route to India and visit the Imperial City on the way. He had promised to write from every point where he stopped, and so he did not seem so very far away, and Queenie grew brighter and gayer and consented to see Mr. Beresford, whom she had persistly ignored, and after rating him soundly for the part he had had taken in sending Phil away, she became very gracious to him, for Phil had forgiven him, and she must do so too, and she rode with him one day after his fast horse, and was so bright, and coquettish, and bewitching, that Mr. Beresford forgot himself, and in lifting her from the carriage held her hand tighter in his than was at all necessary. But Queenie wrenched it away, and with her usual frankness, said:

"You are not to squeeze my hand that way, Mr. Beresford, or think because I rode with you that your are on probation, as you call it, for you are not. I am not trying to reconsider, and never shall."

This state of things was not very hopeful for Mr. Beresford, who, nevertheless, drove away more in love than ever with the little lady of Hetherton, who, after he was gone, went to her room, where she found on her dressing-table a letter which Pierre had brought from the office during her absence. It was a foreign letter, post-marked at Mentone, France. Reinette's first exclamation was:

"From the agent. Now I shall hear from Christine."

This was the thing of all others which she had greatly desired, but now that it seemed to be within her grasp she waited and loitered a little, and took off her hat, and shawl and gloves, and laid them carefully away, and picked a few dead leaves from a pot of geraniums in the window, before breaking the seal. And even then she hesitated with a strangely nervous feeling as if from fear that the letter might contain something she would be happier not to know—something her father would have withheld from her had he been there with her

"But, no," she said, at last, "how foolish I am. Christine was faithful to my mother, and father pensioned her for it, as he ought to do, and those vile, evil-minded Polignacs thought there was harm in it. They did know my father, or what stuff the Hethertons are made of;" so saying, she opened the letter and read:

"MENTONE, France, Oct. 18th, 18—

"To Miss Hetherton, of Merrivale, Worcester Co., Mass., U.S.A.

"My employer, M. Albech, is gone away for a few days, and told me to open his letters, and, if necessary, answer them for him. So when yours and monsieur's came, I opened and read; that is, read yours, but monsieur's was in English, and it took a long time to make out that it was the same as yours, and asked information of Christine Bodine, pensioner of M. Hetherton, deceased.',

"That was Mr. Beresford who sent him an English letter. What business has he to pry into my affairs?" Reinette exclaimed, under her breath, and her cheeks were scarlet, and her breath came hurriedly, and then seemed to cease altogether as she read on:

"I could not remember any one by that name, but there was a certain Madame Henri La Rue, to whom, by reference to M. Albrech's books, I find that moneys were paid regularly by Messrs. Polignac & Co., Paris, for a M. Hetherton, until last summer, when the entire principal was sent to Madame La Rue, at 'Oak Bluffs, Martha's Vineyard, Mass., U. S A.,' where it seems she is living, though whether she is the person you are wishing to find I do not know. Your billet to Christine Bodine I will keep until M. Albrech returns, and if he knows the woman he will forward it.

"Hoping my letter is satisfactory, I am your obedient servant,

LOUIS ARNAUD."

"Madame Henri La Rue, Oak Bluffs, Martha's Vineyard, Mass., U. S. A.," Reinette kept repeating to herself, while a feeling of terror took possession of her, and made her for a moment powerless to move or reason clearly. "Who is this Madame La Rue, and where have I seen her?" she asked herself in a bewildered kind of way, and then at last it came to her who Mrs. La Rue was, and where she had seen her.

"Margery's mother! Christine Bodine! impossible!" she cried, reading Louis Arnaud's letter again and again, while her thoughts went backward, and with lightning rapidity gathered up every incident connected with Mrs. La Rue which had seemed strange to her, and made her dislike the woman for her unwarrantable familiarity.

As distinctly as if it were but yesterday she recalled their first meeting in Paris in Margery's receiving-room when Mrs. La Rue had stared at her so, and touched her hands and dress, and seemed so strange and queer; and since then she had so often offended with what appeared like over-gratitude for kindness shown to Margery.

"And all the time when I was talking of my nurse and my desire to find her, she knew she was Christine and made no sign," she said; "and once she bade me stop searching for her, as finding her might bring more pain than pleasure. What does she mean, and why does she not wish me to know her? Was there anything wrong between—No, no, no!" and Reinette almost shrieked as she said the emphatic "no's." "Mother trusted her; mother loved her. I have it in her own words written to papa. 'Christine is faithful and tender as if she was my mother, instead of my maid; and if I should die, you must always be kind to her for what she has been to me,' she wrote, and that's why he sent her the money. There was nothing wrong on father's side; but she—why has she never told me? What has she done? What is she? Yes, she was right. It is more pain than pleasure to find her; but if she had only told me who she was, it would have been such joy to know she was Margery's mother—my Margery still, thank God, for she has had no part in this concealment. She has no suspicion that Christine Bodine and her mother are one and the same. Mrs. La Rue must have been married soon after mother died, for Margery and I are nearly the same age."

This mention of Margery helped Reinette, and the pain in her heart was not quite so heavy, or her resentment toward Mrs. La Rue so great. She was Margery's mother, and whatever happened, Reinette would stand by the girl whom she loved so much.

* * * * * * * * *

"Please, mademoiselle, have you heard the bell; it has rung three times, and dinner is growing cold," Pierre said, putting his head in at the door; and then Reinette roused herself to find that it was getting dark, for the November twilight was fast creeping into the room.

"Yes, Pierre, I know; I am not coming—I'm not hungry. Tell them to clear the table," she said, abstractedly; and then, as Pierre looked inquiringly at her, she continued: "Stay, Pierre; come here, and shut the door, and come close to me, so no one can hear. Pierre, I've found Christine Bodine!"

"Yes? You have found her? Where?" Pierre said, looking wonderingly at his young mistress, whose white face and excited manner puzzled and alarmed him.

"Here, Pierre, in Merrivale. While I was searching for her across the water she was here, not a mile away, and never told me. Pierre, Mrs. La Rue is or was Christine Bodine!"

"*Mon Dieu!*" Pierre ejaculated with a significant shrug of his shoulders and a rapid movement of his hands. "Madame La Rue Christine Bodine! I am very much; yes, I suppose I am very much astonished!"

But he was not. He had never shared Reinette's implicit faith in Christine, whom he believed his master had cursed in Liverpool, after receiving her letter, and he put things together rapidly, and to himself he thought:

"Yes, madame is Christine. I am not surprised; but to Reinette he said. "Who told you? How do you know it? There must be some mistake, madame surely would never have kept silent so long."

"There no mistake. I can trust you, Pierre; and I begin to feel as if you were the only one I have to trust in. Everything and everybody is slipping away from me. This is the letter from the agent in Mentone, who paid her the money for Messrs. Polignac in Paris. You know you were in their office once with father and saw him give his check for twelve hundred and fifty francs to be sent to her. Read the letter, Pierre, and you will know all I do."

She handed it to him, and striking a light he read it through, while Reinette watched him narrowly to see what effect it had upon him. But aside from frequent ejaculations of surprise he made no comment, and just then the dinner-bell rang again, and this time long and loud as if the ringer were growing impatient.

"Oh that dreadful bell," Reinette exclaimed, putting her hands to her ears to shut out the sound. "Will they never stop ringing it. or understand that I am not coming? Go, Pierre, and tell them to clear the table away; tell them I am not hungry; tell them I am sick and tired, and wish to be let alone: tell them anything to keep them away from me. Nobody must come to-night but you. Go quick, before they ring again, or Mrs. Jerry comes herself. She must not know what we do."

Thus entreated Pierre departed with the message to Mrs. Jerry, who had become somewhat accustomed to the vagaries of her young mistress. This was not the first time her dinner had been untouched when Reinette was in one of her moods, and so she only lamented that the fish and sauce Lyonnaise which she had prepared with so much care would be wasted in the kitchen, but inquired anxiously what ailed the young lady and asked if she should not go up herself and see.

"No, no; she only wants quiet, that is all; by and by she may have some coffee, when I tell you," Pierre said, and then he went back to Reinette, who sat with her hands clasped tightly together and a look on her white face which puzzled him, for he did not know that she was bravely fighting down a suspicion to harbor which would be to dishonor her father in his grave.

"Pierre," she said, lifting her dry, heavy eyes appealingly to him, and speaking like a sick, weary child who wants to be petted; "Pierre, I am strangely shaken by this news, because I do not understand why Christine should wish to hide her identity from me, when she knows how I wanted to find her. It looks as if there was something which she wished to keep from me—something wrong in her life after she left us—father and me—and was married to this M. La Rue. I wished so much to find her, and had so much faith in and love for her, and now—oh, Pierre, it makes me cold, and sick, and faint. Forget, can't you, that I am a woman almost twenty-one; try and fancy me a little girl again, as I was when you first came to Chateau des Fleurs, and take me up and carry me to the couch. I could not walk there to save my life, for the strength has all gone from my body."

Pierre had carried her in his arms many a time in the years gone by, and now he took her gently up, and, laying her upon the couch, brought a pillow for her, and fixed it underher head, and covered her with her shawl, and put fresh coal on the grate, for the November night was cold and chill, and outside the first snow of the season was beginning to fall.

"Now sit down by me, Pierre," she continued, "and rub my hands, they are so numb and lifeless, and let me talk to you of the olden time, when we lived in the country and were so very happy."

"Yes, mademoiselle," Pierre said, sitting down beside her and rubbing and chafing the limp white fingers which seemed to have no vitality in them.

"Pierre," she began, "we were so happy when papa was alive; he was so good, He was always kind to you, was he not?"

"Yes, always."

"And he was good to everybody, Pierre?"

"Yes, everybody."

"And—and—You were with him in places where he would be under less restraint than when with me, and you think he had as few faults as most men, I am sure?"

"He had not a single fault," Pierre said, emphatically, lying easily and unhesitatingly, thinking the end justified the means.

He knew now that Reinette was wishing to be reassured of her father's truth, and purity, and honor, and though he had but little faith that his late master had possessed either of those virtues to an overwhelming degree, he could not say so to the daughter; he would sooner tell her a hundred lies, and take his chance of being forgiven by and by.

"Thank you Pierre," she said. "You make me feel so happy. I like to think of father as a good, true, honest man; and yet you told me once that you heard him swear in London over a letter he received. He cursed Christine; that must have been Mrs. La Rue. Perhaps he did not like her. Did you ever hear him speak of her at any other time?"

"No, never."

"And did the servants at Chateau des Fleurs ever mention her as other than a nice woman?"

"They never mentioned her at all. I never heard her name except from you and monsieur, and from him only twice—once in the office of Messrs. Polignac, and once in Liverpool, when he certainly did curse her."

"Yes, Pierre," Reinette said, with a quick, gasping breath. "Perhaps he did; papa was the best man in the world—the very best, but all best men will sometimes take unfounded dislikes, and he was not an exception. Possibly Christine had offended him, and he was not one to forget easily. At all events, I am sure Christine is a good woman. My mother trusted her, and bade father be kind to her always. I have it in a letter written before she died, and when Christine was with her. Mrs. La Rue is a good woman."

She kept asserting this as if she feared Pierre might doubt the fact, but if he did he gave no sign, and merely replied:

"She must be good to be the mother of Miss Margery."

"Yes, Pierre, yes," and Reinette roused herself up, and pushing her heavy hair back from her face, said, joyfully: "I see it now; I understand why she has not told me. She did not want Margery to know that she once served in the capacity of nurse, lest she should feel humiliated; that is it; I am sure."

"Unquestionably," Pierre said, ready to assent to anything his young mistress might suggest, no matter how absurd.

"And, Pierre," she continued, "I shall of course tell Mrs. La Rue that I know who she is, but it is not necessary that all the world should know. We need tell no one else."

"No, mademoiselle; but what of Monsieur Beresford? He wrote to M. Albrech, too; he will get an answer; he will know."

"Of course," Queenie said, impatiently. "Why couldn't he mind his own business? But I can trust him. I shall tell him, I know, and that he is to keep silent; and now, leave me, and don't let Mrs. Jerry or any one come near me. I am tired and shall soon retire."

So Pierre left her alone with her thoughts, which kept her awake most of the night, and the next morning found her suffering with one of her headaches, and unable to leave her bed. It was a stormy November day, and the wind blew in gusts over the hill, and drove before it clouds of snow, which was drifting down from the gray sky in great white feathery masses, but bad as was the day, it did not prevent Mr. Beresford from riding over to Hetherton Place, where he was met by Pierre with the message that Miss Hetherton had the headache, and could not see him, Mr. Beresford seemed disappointed, and was about turning away from the door when he said, as if it had just occurred to him:

"By the way, do you know if Miss Hetherton received any letters from France yesterday?"

"She did receive one," Pierre said, looking straight at the lawyer, and feeling sure that he, too had heard from Mentone, and knew the secret of Christine Bodine.

And he was right, for the same mail which brought the letter to Reinette had also in it one for Mr. Beresford from the agent's clerk in Mentone. It was a curious compound of English and French, which took Mr. Beresford nearly two hours to decipher. But he managed it at last with the help of grammar and dictionary, and had a tolerably accurate knowledge of its contents, which surprised and confounded him almost as much as Queenie's letter had confounded her. But in his letter were a few words, or rather insinuations, which were omitted in Queenie's and which affected him more than all the rest, and threw a flood of light upon Mrs. La Rue's reason for keeping her identity with Christine Bodine a secret from Reinette. Did Queenie know what he knew or suspected, Mr. Beresford wondered. Had the agent written to her what he had to Mr. Beresford, and if so, how did she take it? What would she do? A burning, intense desire seized the usually calm, sober lawyer to have these questions answered. He must see Reinette and judge from her face how much, if anything, she knew and so he went to Hetherton Place. But Queenie would not see him. She was sick, and she had received a letter from France. So much he learned, and he rode back to his office, where, for the remainder of the day, he seemed in a most abstracted frame of mind, paying but little attention to his clients, who had never seen him so absent-minded and grave before, and wondered much what ailed him and of what he was thinking. Not of them and their business surely, but of Reinette and the change her coming to Merrivale had made in his hitherto quiet life. How she had turned everything upside down. It was like a romance whose pages he was reading, and now a fresh leaf had been turned which he wished to decipher, and since he could not see Reinette he must seek help in another quarter, and he, who had always been noted for minding his own business better than any man in Merrivale, waited impatiently for evening, when he meant to begin the new chapter.

CHAPTER XXX.

TRYING TO READ THE PAGE.

The night set in dark and stormy even for November, and the wind howled dismally through the tall elms which grew upon the common, while both sleet and rain were falling pitilessly, when Mr. Beresford at last left his office, equipped for an evening call. It was very seldom that he thus honored anyone in town, except Reinette and the ladies at the Knoll, and it was not to see either of these that he was going; it was rather to the cottage to call on Margery La Rue, whom, fortunately, he found alone, as her mother had retired to her room with a toothache and swollen face. Margery let him in herself, and looked fully the surprise she felt when she saw who her visitor was. It was not so much that he should come that night as that he should come at all that astonished the young girl, who, with a woman's intuition, had read the proud man pretty accurately, and guessed that persons like her, whose bread was earned by their own hands, had not much attraction for him. And she was right; but it was his education, his early training, which was at fault, and not the real heart of the man himself. His mother, who was a proud Bostonian, had seldom done so much for herself as to arrange her own hair, and when her immense fortune slipped away from her, and left her comparatively poor, and compelled her sons, two as noble boys as ever called a woman mother, to choose professions and care for themselves, she could not bear the change, and with a feeling that she would rather die than live and work, she died, and very few mourned for her. With such a mother, and a long line of ancestry on her side as proud and exclusive as herself, it is not strange that Mr. Beresford should have imbibed some notions not altogether consistent with democratic institutions. He was proud, and thought a great deal of family and blood, and though he knew that Margery La Rue was lady-like and refined, and though he was always polite and courteous to her when they met, he had unconsciously made her feel the gulf between them, and she had good cause to gaze on him wonderingly as she opened the door, and held it open a moment as if expecting him to give her some message from Queenie, as he had done when Phil went away, and then depart. But he had come purposely to see her, and laughing good-humoredly as he stepped past her into the hall, and brushing the rain-drops from his hair, he said:

"I'm coming in, you see, though I do not wonder that a call on such a wild night as this surprises you. But it is just the weather which brings me here. I believe I've had the blues or something to-day, and need to talk to some one, and as Phil is gone—how I do miss him—and Reinette is sick, I have come to call on you. I hope I am not unwelcome."

He was talking rather queerly, and not at all in a strain complimentary to Margery, who nevertheless, passed it off pleasantly, and said, with her pretty accent, which struck Mr. Beresford with a degree of newness and as something very pretty:

"Thank you, Mr. Beresford; I surely ought to feel honored to be No. 3. Let me see; you said that as Mr. Rossiter was gone, and Reinette sick, you were reduced to the alternative of coming here to be rid of the blues. Is that it? or have my French ears misinterpreted your English meaning?"

"This is the way it sounded, I'll admit," Mr. Beresford said, "but I'm a bungler anyway, so please consider that I have made you number one, for really I have been intending to call for some time."

He took the seat she offered him—a low rocker such as men usually like—and moved it a little more in front of her, where he could look directly at her and study her features closely as she bent over her work, which with his permission, she had resumed, and which, as it was a saque for Miss Anna, must be finished as soon as possible.

How graceful every motion was, and how well her dress of black cashmere, with soft lace ruffles at her throat and sleeves, became her, and how very beautiful she was both in face and form, with her golden hair rippling all over her finely shaped head, her dazzling, wax-like complexion reminding one of rose-leaves and cream, her perfectly regular features, and, more than all, her large, clear, sunny blue eyes, veiled by long, fringed lashes, and shaded by eyebrows so heavy and black that they seemed almost out of place with that hair of golden hue. But they gave her a novel and *distingue* look, and added to her beauty, which, now that he was studying her, struck Mr. Beresford as something remarkable, and made his eyes linger on the fair face with more admiration even than curiosity. But the likeness he sought for was not there, unless it were in the occasional toss of the head on one side—the significant shrug of the shoulders, or gestures of the hands—and something in the tone of the voice when it grew very earnest as she talked to him of Reinette, always of Reinette, who was not like her in the least. In feature and complexion Margery was the handsomer of the two. Mr. Beresford confessed that with a kind of jealous pang as if, in some way, a wrong were done the dark-faced, dark-eyed Queenie, who, put side by side with Margery La Rue, would, nevertheless, win every time, and make people see only herself, with her wonderful sparkle, and flash, and brightness, which threw everything else into the shade. Queenie was the diamond and Margery the pearl, and they were not at all alike, and Mr. Beresford felt puzzled and inclined to believe that insinuation of the agent a lie especially after he had talked with Margery awhile of her friend.

"You have known Reinette a long time?" he said, and she replied:

"Yes, a long time—ever since we were little girls—though it seems but yesterday since she climbed those narrow, winding stairs up to that low, dark room, where I staid all day long with no company but the cat, and nothing besides my playthings to amuse me, except to look down into the narrow street below, the Rue St. Honore, and watch the carts, and carriages, and people as they pass, and wonder when mother would come home, and if she would bring me, as she sometimes did, a bon-bon, or a white, tender *croissant* from the baker's, which I liked so much better for my supper than our dark, sour bread."

"Yes," Mr. Beresford said, leaning forward and listening eagerly to what Margery was telling him of her early life in the attics of Paris, and wondering a little that she should be so communicative.

"Most girls would try to conceal the fact that they had once known such poverty," he thought, but he did not know Margery La Rue, or guess that it was in part her pride which made her talk as she was talking.

She was naturally reserved and reticent with regard to herself, but to him, whose value of birth, and blood, and family connections she rightly guessed, she would speak openly, and show him that it was something more than a mere dressmaker—a sewing-woman—whom he was honoring with his society, and in whom he was interested in spite of himself. She divined that, readily, by the kindling of his eyes when they met hers as she talked, and by some of those many subtle influences by which a woman knows that the man she is talking with is entertained and pleased with herself as well as with what she is saying.

So when he said to her, with a kind of pity in his tone, "And you were so desolate as that when Reinette found you?" she answered:

"Yes, more desolate than you can guess—you who have never known what poverty means in a large city like Paris. But I was not unhappy, either," she added, quickly. "I had too much love and petting from my mother for that. I was only lonely in her absence, for she worked at a hair-dresser's and was gone all day, and I kept the house and got the meals for father till he died."

"Your father—yes," Mr. Beresford repeated. "What was he, what did he do, and when did he die?"

He seemed very eager in his questionings, and mistaking his meaning altogether, Margery's cheeks flushed scarlet, but her voice was steady and clear as she replied:

"I do not know that he did anything. I think it is a fashion in France more than here for the women to work and the men to take their ease. At all events, father had no regular occupation, that I know of. Sometimes he acted as guide to strangers, for he could speak a little English, and sometimes he was employed for a few days as waiter at some of the Duval restaurants, and he once took mother and me there to dine. He died when I was a little girl, about eight years old. That was before Reinette found me and hanged everything. She heard of me from old Lisette, the laundress, who lived on the floor below, and she came up to our humble room in her scarlet cloak and hood, trimmed with ermine, and filled it with glory at once. You know what a halo of brightness seems to encircle her and affect everything around her? And how she did sparkle and glow, and light up the whole room, as she sat there in that hard wooden chair, and talked to me as if I were her equal, I standing awkwardly by, in my coarse, high-necked working apron, with broom in hand, and gazing at her as if she had been a being from another sphere."

How rapidly and excitedly she talked, gesticulating with her hands, which were as small and white as those of any lady, and how large and bright her blue eyes grew, while on her cheeks there was more rose than cream as she described that first interview with Reinette so vividly that Mr. Beresford, who had something of an artist's imagination, could see the low room, far up the winding stairs, the humble furniture, the bare floor, the moldering fire on the hearth, the brush and broom on the floor, the wooden chair, the dark-eyed little girl in scarlet and ermine who sat there with the captured cat in her lap, talking to another child quite as beautiful as herself, though of another type of beauty, and clad in the coarse garments of the poor. He could see it all so plain, and, forgetting for a time why he was there, he listened still more intently, while Margery went on to tell him of the ride in the Champs 'd Elysees, where she wore the scarlet cloak and played she was Mr. Hetherton's little girl, while Queenie sat demurely at her side, clad in homely garments, and making believe that she was Margery La Rue, whose home was up the winding stairs in the Rue St Honore.

"I think that one act bound me to her forever," Margery said, "though it was the beginning of many make-believes and many deeds of kindness, for through Queenie's influence her father paid many expenses in part at the English school which she attended, and where I learned to speak your language and all I know besides, and after that she stood my fast friend in everything and treated me more like a sister than an inferior, as I am, by birth and social position. I was sometimes at her lovely country home, Chateau des Fleurs, and there we often played that I was the daughter of the house and she the invited guest. I think her love has never failed me since the day she first came to me and brought the glorious sunlight with her. So do you wonder that I love her? I would lay down my life for her, if need be—would sacrifice everything for her, and I sometimes wish that I might have the chance to show how much I love her, and would endure for her sake."

Margery paused here, and with clasped hands, and eyes which had in them a rapt, far-away look, seemed almost to see looming on the horizon not far in the distance the something for which she longed, and which, when it came, would test her as few women have ever been tested in their love for another.

It was not possible that the dark shadow touched her now, although it was so near, and yet she shivered a little and drew a long breath as she at last came back to the present and turned her eyes upon Mr. Beresford, who had been regarding her curiously and seeing in this expression of her face a resemblance to something which he could not define or place. He only knew it was not the Hetherton look he saw in her, and if not, then was that insinuation of Albert Bertrand's without foundation? He hoped so, but he said to her presently:

"Did you ever see Queenie's father?—did you know him, I mean—you or your mother?"

"No, neither of us," Margery answered, promptly. "I saw him once when Queenie and I were riding in the Bois, and she made him come and speak to me, but I did not like him much. He impressed me as one very proud and haughty, who only endured me for Queenie's sake. He was fine-looking, though, and his manners were very elegant. Did you know him, Mr. Beresford?"

"Scarcely at all, as I was a mere boy when he went away, but I have heard much of him from the villagers; he was not very popular, I imagine," Mr. Beresford replied, and then they spoke of the Fergusons, so unlike the Hethertons and Rossiters, although connected with them, and Margery said, laughingly:

"The daughters of the Fergusons seem to have a habit of making grand marriages; first Mrs. Rossiter, then Mrs. Hetherton, and lastly, to all human appearance, Anna, who will unquestionably soon become Mrs. Major Rossiter. I do not like Anna Ferguson, and she can never be a lady, though she marry the Duke of Argyle."

This was a great deal for Margery to say, but Anna had tried her sorely, and she was smarting from a fresh indignity heaped upon her that very day when the young lady had come to give some orders about the saque, on which she worked while she talked to Queenie Hetherton, so different in every respect, though she was to the purple born and had a right, as Margery thought, to look down upon such as she.

Mr. Beresford had not succeeded in reading the page just as he had expected to read it, and was a good deal puzzled and perplexed when, at rather a late hour for him, he said good-night to Margery, and went back to his rooms at the hotel, with his mind full of what she had told him of her life as connected with Reinette Hetherton. It was very real to him—the past intercourse of these two girls, and especially that scene in the attic when they first met face to face.

He could not get that scene out of his mind. It would make such a telling picture, he thought, as he sat alone in his room, listening to the sound of the rain, and thinking of the two little girls in No. 40 of the tenement house on the Rue St. Honore. Mr. Beresford's mother had affected to be something of an artist and dabbed in water colors, and had had a fanciful studio in her house, and the son had inherited something of her genius, though he seldom had time to indulge his ta